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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2664
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2697
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2957
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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK
USAID/W/ME FOR ELAINE SCOTT
P FOR HMUSTAPHA AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT FOCUSED ON FOREST FIRES

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Newly appointed Minister of Environment Tony Karam discussed his priorities for the ministry with Charge in a August 4 courtesy call. First, Karam intends to work with civilian groups to enforce current environmental protection laws. Second, he would like to create an elite firefighting unit that could be used to fight forest fires. He requested USG assistance to help in the short-term. On politics, Karam believes March 14, with which he is allied, needs to win 55 percent of the Christian vote to be successful in the 2009 elections. End summary.

KARAM'S PRIORITIES

2. (C) March 14 member and newly appointed Minister of Environment Antoine "Tony" Karam (Lebanese Forces) told Charge Grant, accompanied by Poloff, in an August 4 courtesy call that he has two priorities for the ministry. First, Karam intends to implement existing laws with the cooperation and assistance of local NGOs. In his view, these civilian organizations are "not influenced by politics" and so will apply laws objectively. Karam said his second priority is to establish an elite firefighting unit to act as first responders at the outbreak of forest fires that afflict Lebanon most summers.

3. (C) Karam was disappointed with the capabilities of the all-volunteer firefighting force, after a personal tour of the scene of one of the late-July forest fires near Beirut. He reported the firefighters lack sufficient equipment, are not well-trained professionals and are hesitant to act because of a lack of government insurance or compensation. He noted that the GOL had contracted for firefighting helicopters from a Russian company based in Cyprus, but he saw a need for having its own helicopters (or other air assets) to fight fires at the outset and requested USG assistance.

4. (C) Charge explained to Karam that Embassy had researched fire fighting assistance the USG could provide to Lebanon. For most assistance, the lead time required meant that it was not likely the USG could assist this fire season. However, he noted, the U.S. Forest Service is developing a program of

assistance for Lebanon focused on forest management to prevent fires. A USFS team likely will come to Lebanon soon to begin formulating a plan that would help for the long term. Karam said he was appreciative and understood the bureaucratic realities, but asked for "easier things" like protective clothing and tools for the firefighters.

CHRISTIAN AREAS KEY
IN 2009 ELECTIONS

15. (C) Karam, a Christian, medical doctor and founding member of the Lebanese Forces (LF) party led by Samir Geagea, believes the 2009 elections are an important turning point for Lebanon. He predicted March 14 needs to garner at least 55 percent of the vote in Christian areas to win the election. He noted that the LF wanted stronger wording in the ministerial statement about the state's dominance over all decisions. (Note: at the cabinet meeting later that day, Karam was one of four ministers, all March 14 Christians, who expressed a reservation before approving the ministerial statement. End note.)

GRANT